



The Cleveland Museum of Art

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RALPH BURNS PHOTOGRAPHS: GRACELAND

August 16–November 12, 1995

On August 16, the anniversary of the 1977 death of Elvis Presley, the Cleveland Museum of Art opens **Ralph Burns Photographs: Graceland**, a new show complementing the major exhibition, **Elvis + Marilyn: 2 x Immortal**. Twenty-two black-and-white photographs document Elvis Presley fans' pilgrimages to the star's Memphis home, Graceland, mostly at the time of his January birthday and during "Tribute Week," leading up to the anniversary of his death. The exhibition remains on view through November 12, 1995.

Late one night in August of 1978, Ralph Burns was working in his darkroom in Asheville, North Carolina, when he heard a report on the radio that people were beginning to gather at Graceland to honor the first anniversary of Elvis's death. Moved by irresistible curiosity, Burns drove all night across Tennessee to Memphis, arriving before dawn to find tens of thousands of people congregating there. That was the first of his frequent trips to photograph the people who keep the cult of Elvis alive. His subsequent seventeen years of periodic excursions have yielded a body of work that documents the pervasiveness of the Elvis mystique, through subjects including everyone from sincere mourners and reverentially t-shirted grandparents, to impersonators in every shape and size and Elvis-emulating kids who weren't even born when Presley died.

Burns admits he was disinclined to empathize with his subjects when he set out on that first journey. But in the years since, he has come to view them less and less in the common stereotypical image of Elvis fans as fanatical, curiously deluded individuals. To many fans, he believes, Elvis represents freedom—the freedom to rise from poverty to fame, the freedom to openly express sexuality, the freedom to wear a white, rhinestone-studded jumpsuit if you really want to. Elvis is seen not so much as a role model—because his fans are well aware of his sad and ungraceful demise—but as a symbol of the attainability and fragility of their own dreams. To Burns, "one of the most exciting things is to realize that these people are more in touch with their feelings than most people. These folks are being free enough from fear of scorn to pursue their emotions."

This exhibition was organized by Tom Hinson, curator of contemporary art. Six more of Burns's photographs are included in **Elvis + Marilyn**.

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Press Release